DOES IT PAY TO BE RELIGIOUS?
Matthew 10:37-42
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Does it pay to be religious? The Chairman of the Board of the Tiffany Company thinks so. In an article in the May 22 issue of New York Magazine on the growing number of business executives and bankers who have been "born again", Walter Hoving is quoted: "I think people make religion look complicated. It's really very simple. You open yourself to the Lord and the Lord helps. At one time, when I had to buy Bonwit Teller, I was $2.5 million short and didn't know how to get it. It was completely a miracle. And the same thing happened when I purchased Tiffany and I was $1 million short."

In the same vein, I had an acquaintance in another city for whom Mr. Hoving's testimony would have been very real. A successful business man, he had undergone a rather dramatic conversion experience and felt that God was calling him to establish a Christian Radio Station somewhere in Florida. It was at a time when the real estate market was very slow, and he encountered real difficulty in selling his house at anything close to what he thought it was worth. And so he prayed about it. Lo and behold, a buyer appeared, signed on the dotted line and rewarded my friend with a tidy profit. He was convinced that God had interceded to help him earn a few dollars.

I confess that I never know quite what to make of that sort of thing. One of my deepest operating principles is to respect and never to question the authenticity of another person's religious experience, even when it is contrary to what I happen to believe. I am equally careful to resist from the particular to the general: about creating sweeping theological truths out of the personal experience of one individual. Perhaps God did help Mr. Hoving find $2.5 million to purchase Bonwit Teller, and perhaps He did intercede to find a buyer, at a profit, for my friend's house. There is no way, of course, to prove that He did or did not. Nor is there any justification for assuming that He will be persuaded to act in that manner should we ask Him.

There was a time, however, when the mainline Protestant Church thought that the answer to the question, "Does it pay to be religious?" was a robust yes. On a superficial level it was clearly good business to be a churchman: preferably an Episcopalian, perhaps a Presbyterian, maybe even a Congregationalist. On a deeper level the legacy of the Puritans was felt throughout Protestantism in earlier days; a legacy which held that God does, indeed, reward righteousness, in very tangible ways. The unfortunate, but logical, inference was that financial success - poverty - was the mark of impiety and unrighteousness. The rich are good: the poor are bad. If it were not so, the argument ran, why does God seem always to be helping the rich?

We have outgrown that, of course. We have become a little more honest with the Bible, and a little more sensitive to the complexities of poverty. We are not so quick to make value judgments on the basis of a person's bank account. But down deep in many of us, we would like to believe that ultimately it does pay, at least a little bit, to be religious.

If we look at the Bible, however, the doctrine will not fit. The people of God in the Old Testament receive very little by way of tangible rewards for their having been chosen as His special nation. In fact, about all they get out of it is a lot of trouble, suffering, exile, defeat, disaster after disaster with an occasional attempt by one of their prophets to smooth it all over by suggesting that the suffering has meaning. I am reminded of that delightful New Yorker cartoon portraying a group of Rabbis conversing. One says: "If only Moses had turned right instead of

left: we'd have the oil and they'd have the Ten Commandments."

In the New Testament, Jesus was totally candid with His disciples. Their lot would not always be pleasant. Curcifixion loomed on His horizon and He warned them not to expect much better for themselves. They would be ignored, persecuted, imprisoned, banished and sometimes executed. They would have little to call their own besides sandals and tunic. He told them that the essence of discipleship was a self-denial so absolute that even the dearest human realtionships would have to be secondary to their commitment to Him. He certainly never promised that they would prosper because of their faith.

The history of the church teaches an interesting lesson in this regard. The most productive and creative times have been, without exception, those periods when the church has been persecuted, driven underground, opposed by the civil authorities. On the other hand, those times when the church has been welcomed by the culture, handsomely rewarded in terms of property, money and prestige, have not been particularly productive and creative.

The academics have been quick and persistent in pointing that out. In our age, when the Christian church has made its peace with the culture and settled back to enjoy the rewards of its affluence the academic community delights in making us uncomfortable with our relative comfort. The job of the preacher in this situation, we are told, is to "comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable." Out of the horrors of the Third Reich came the powerful voice of Dietrich Bonhoeffer teaching that when Christ calls a man He bids him come and die. And Professor James Smart, who was in our pulpit last year,in his latest book, The Cultural Subversion of the Christian Faith, writes that "American Christianity is often only a pale imitation of the life of discipleship, sacrifice and obedience portrayed in the New Testament." A friend of mine,Professor John Mulder, at Princeton Seminary, has written a recent essay on the crisis in the church and urges that we recover our sense of the reality of crucifixion and resurrection as the motifs that bring life to the church. The church really lives when it is prepared to die. His words bite a bit - "The Gospel in America is colored by a pervasive hedonism at once materialistic and emotional. One longs to hear a testimonial of how following Christ did not bring prosperity. American Christianity has a love affair with success, and it effects every sphere of the church's life." (Theology Today, April 1978, p.4).

I am convinced that we need that reminder. It is very easy to measure churches by the same standards we employ to measure other institutions in this country; size and fiscal growth. We regard, too easily, a church as successful if people are joining it and its budget is growing. Likewise, we regard, too easily, a church as unsuccessful if its vital signs are moving in the opposite direction regardless of the reason. The truth of the matter is that a church may be wildly successful and popular and growing by leaps and bounds and not be doing much of anything that its Lord seemed to care about. The simple truth is that we are not primarily in the growth business: our business is doing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. That may mean that we grow: it may also mean slowly giving up the life of an institution. The truth is that we are called to be faithful.

On the other hand, it is easy to romanticize poverty, suffering and persecution: to seek it: to establish failure as a goal and then, in a curious twist, parade it as success when it happens, which it does under those circumstances. The time was not long ago when large, stable congregations were suspect, their pastors regarded

as court chaplains to the aristocracy, while the real heroes were the men and women who sought out and received persecution and suffering. The church has, at times, over-reacted to its own success. Theologically, we have backed ourselves into a corner where the whole matter of rewards cannot even be discussed intelligently.

Yet, Jesus did not ignore the subject. In fact, He addressed it rather overtly. In our New Testament Lesson this morning, the subject of rewards receives full attention. Three times it is mentioned -

> "He who receives a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward."
> "He who receives a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward.."
> "Whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones...
> shall not lose his reward."

Now, before we leap to the conclusion that there are tangible, monetary rewards for being religious, we must recall the other side of the picture. Jesus didn't say that. Before we conclude that a Gospel of selfishness and self-centeredness is appropriate, we must recall that He prefaced those remarks by telling His disciples that the way to find life was to lose it. That is to say, He was changing the basic ground rules. He was assuming for Himself the right to define the word "reward". And until we allow that, we will not make much sense out of what He said. Jesus was, I have always felt, the ultimate realist about the human condition. He was no soft-headed romantic, inviting people to lose their lives for the sheer joy of it. He knew, and understood and accepted the fact that people, all people want life; that in the human heart there is an unquenchable thirst for meaning and significance and peace. He did not say that it was selfish to want those things. He offered a way, I believe, to find them.

That, I believe, is the only genius we have. We have something to announce to our culture: something our culture desperately needs to hear. There are two ideologies in conflict out there. They are set, currently, in the context of the generation gap. The adult, traditional view is that a person's self-interest is best served by hard work, discipline, prudence, saving, for the purpose of reaping a reward some day in the future. The other view, often espoused by young people, is that self-interest is best served by "doing your own thing" now. "Have fun" is the way it was said in an address I heard recently. I take that to mean that the self is served best if one does whatever one wants to do so long as it feels good.

Ironically, advocates of both use the Gospel as defense and can quote scripture. But, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it seems to me, says no to both of those views. It sees the wrongness of both in the fundamental thesis which they share; namely, that self-satisfaction, peace, wholeness are available to the individual if he gives his life to their pursuit. That's the trouble, according to Jesus. And that is very close to what Christianity has always defined as sin: the elevation of self to the position of sole moral and behavioral arbiter; the elevation of self-gratification as the primary motivation for all of life. The project is doomed for failure, if Jesus knew what He was talking about, whether you can enjoy your life by investing every penny so that you can enjoy your retirement some day, or whether you are consuming your life entertaining your individual wants and drives in the present. It won't work - you're playing by the wrong set of rules. And there are signs that we are finally realizing that.

I picked up a copy of the recently published Gallup Opinion Index on Religion in America. I was surprised to read the following in the introduction: The image of church goers, in the eyes of others, may be negative but "it is important to bear in mind that church involvement and religious commitment have very positive, and measurable effects on one's life style and outlook on life." The report goes on to list a few examples: positive attitude, a feeling of happiness, involvement in charitable, person-to-person activity. But the intriguing passage was editorial in nature. The researchers conclude that, "People of all ages are searching for deeper meaning in their lives. There is evidence of considerable and growing spiritual experimentation, a new interest in the cults and mysticism. Many appear to be spiritually homeless and looking for the particular faith or denomination in which they feel at home."

It is so clear and so simple that we often miss it. The rewards for which we are willing to give our very lives are right there in front of us. Beneath the frantic working and saving and consuming, what we really want is something elusive called peace of mind, some sense that our individual lives matter, some feeling that after the children are gone our existence counts for something, some knowledge that we are needed and wanted and loved.

In the plainest language possible Jesus taught that those gifts are given to us the moment we stop pursuing them and devote ourselves to someone, something other than self. In the plainest language possible Jesus held up a vision of true joy which results when someone else's needs receive attention before our own. In brilliant, but simple, words He said: "Whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones will not lose his reward."

It may not be what we wanted, or what we thought we wanted. We may not be rewarded by wealth or a prospective buyer for our property, or a promotion, or success. It will be something far more important than that. The New Testament calls it salvation and the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the announcement that it is there - right in front of your eyes - in the form of the person who needs you.

James Russell Lowell caught the beauty and truth of it in "The Vision of Sir Launfall". The good knight plans to ride off in search of the Holy Grail, willing to travel to the ends of the earth and to give life itself for the quest. But he is haunted by the knowledge that at his gate there is a leper. And so he stopped his journey before it began, dismounted, took out his cup and gave the leper a drink. And the cup - the cup of cold water offered to one of these little ones - became the Holy Grail. The search was ended. What he was looking for was at his very gate in the form of a man who needed his love and kindness and compassion. The simple cup became the Holy Cup of Christ.

Does it pay to be religious?

Amen.

God our Father, you know our deepest needs before we are able to identify them. Save us from empty selfishness. Fill our lives with the joy of love and generosity and kindness. Make us sensitive to those who need us: those whose needs are our salvation: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.